

**The Black, Latino, Asian Pacific American Law Alumni Association
Annual BLAPA Spring Dinner - April 17, 2009 - Battery Gardens**

Being the Change We Need for Our Communities

I am very fond of NYU. My first teaching position as an adjunct professor was at NYU, and I gave up that formal tie a couple of years ago only because I was overextended beyond my time capabilities. Nevertheless, NYU is a very special place and its institutional commitment both to the diversity of its student body and to public service sets a standard among law schools.

I thank the Directors of Alumni Relations (particularly Damali Smith) who invited me to speak tonight and I congratulate the award recipients, Michael Oshima, Joseph Scantlebury, and Keith Harper for the recognition their distinguished service has earned them.

I was asked to speak tonight on the theme for tonight's dinner - "Being the Change We Need for Our Communities. I decided the focus of my talk earlier this week after attending a dinner of the Association of Judges of Hispanic Heritage. As most of you know, I am Puerto Rican and I have been involved as a leader and supporter throughout my life of many Puerto Rican and Latino student and professional groups.

At this recent dinner, one of the speakers was paying tribute to a judicial colleague, Justice Charles Tejada, who died last year and whom we all loved in my community. The speaker described the path-breaking efforts Charlie had expended in forming LALSA when he was here at NYU because of his feeling, probably rightly then, that the BALSAs student group was not adequately championing causes unique to the Latino community.

The efforts today of individual community groups are still vital to the identification, promotion, and solution-finding for each community's unique challenges. My focus today, however, is to emphasize that while it is important to continue working in individual community groups, we must nonetheless keep sight always that we must equally continue working together to effect real change for the many problems that affect all of us - poverty, lack of education, and lack of opportunity.

As I look out and see the wide diversity of faces in the audience tonight, my heart swells with hope. Hope that our communities have grown fully to appreciate that, working together, we are more likely to achieve greater change than working alone in isolated groups. The power of working together was, this past November, resoundingly proven.

At every campaign stop I watched on television, I noted that the audiences surrounding the candidates were the most diverse I had ever seen involved in the American electoral process. The wide coalition of groups that joined forces to elect America's first Afro-American President was awe inspiring in both the passion the members of the coalition exhibited in their efforts and the discipline they showed in the execution of their goals.

Almost every historic change in the law has come through the vision provided by someone who has been supported by many. Seminal decisions in race and sex discrimination have come from Supreme Courts composed exclusively of white males. The people who argued the cases before the Supreme Court that have changed the legal landscape, however, were mostly people of color and women, aided by people of many races and of both sexes.

Recall that Justice Thurgood Marshall argued Brown v. Board of Education, but Justice Marshall had a cadre of brilliant Afro-American lawyers like later Judges Robert Carter and Constance Baker Motley and non Afro-American lawyers like Jack Greenberg and many others providing him and the cause with support and assistance. Similarly, Justice Ginsburg, with other women and men attorneys, was instrumental in advocating and convincing courts that equality of work requires equality in the terms and conditions of employment.

I hope that it does not take a grand historical event like the Presidential election of a person of color to remind us that the differences we project onto others and which so often alienate us from each other are superficial and not terribly meaningful. The other day at an event I reminded people that we have different faces, but the same physical heart beats in all of us. On November 4, we saw past our ethnic, religious and gender differences.

What is our challenge today: Our challenge as lawyers and court related professionals and staff, as citizens of the world is to keep the spirit of the common joy we shared on November 4 alive in our everyday existence. We have to continue to work together for our common goal of bringing the promise of America's greatness and fairness to all members of our society.

We must remember to stand united and face our problems and find solutions to our problems as one community.

Our challenge is to give unselfishly and openly to the needy in our society, regardless of their gender or ethnic background.

You cannot pick up the newspapers today without reading about the hardship our economic times are inflicting on all people.

Our ethnic groups, who live on the margin always, will endure even greater hardship, but pain and hardship does not stop for color, race or gender.

Those of us fortunate enough to be well-educated and earn a decent living have an obligation to make change by working at it. It is the message of service that President Obama is trying to trumpet and it is a clarion call we are obligated to heed. We must devote ourselves to bettering the lives of all the needy of our society and we must do it together.

That means that each of us - no matter what kind of work we do to make a living - must do more than just that. We must identify those causes important to us and support those causes actively. It means giving money, when we have it, to organizations that provide services we value. It means giving time to public service activities. I am fond of reminding young lawyers - but I think more experienced lawyers need the reminder as well - that the needs of our community are extraordinarily varied, so your giving can take many different forms.

It can mean helping a person in need to write a resume or draft a will. It can mean, when you have the legal resources, helping asylum or withholding of removal immigrants or indigents seeking social security benefits. It can mean serving on your local school community boards and making sure our kids get the quality public education they need to survive in this competitive world. It means being active in voter registrations. The bottom line is that giving can take many forms - but give we must because our needs are many and human resources are a priceless commodity.

For the many of you who have seen me in Court, I hope you have seen how much I enjoy my work and how passionate I am about the good the law can and often does in our society.

Our legal institutions are integral parts of how we interact with each other, but the most important part of change is not the law - it is the people who drive change and the vision they carry and execute. There are many needs in our society but I remain hopeful, today, looking at all of you here, members of the Black, Latino, Pan Asian Association, that many more historic and ordinary changes will continue to happen so long as we continue to remember that standing united and working together for change gets us very far.

I understand there are some newly admitted law students in the audience. I hope for you the happiness I have found in our profession. I assume that you will understand from my message tonight that I believe that happiness in the profession is found by giving of yourself to others. I do caution you, however: law school is hard and do not overextend yourself in giving until you have done enough to master your skills as a lawyer. You make the greatest contributions when you have developed your craft well. Thank you all for inviting me to be with you tonight and I hope that the many of you whom I have not met before will come up and say hello to me.

